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Grateful Alumni Give Half-Million Dollar Gift for EIU Renovation

Feb-02-2006

More than 50 years ago, newlyweds Max and Mary Cougill had to sell their car in order to help make the \$250 monthly payments on their newly purchased grocery store.

Five decades and several profitable business ventures later, the couple are being thanked for their generous gift of a half-million dollars to Eastern Illinois University -- the school both of them credit for their success.

"Eastern gave me, along with my wife, the tools to work with," Mr. Cougill said, noting, too, that son Jeffery and granddaughter Alison graduated from Eastern in 1976 and 2001, respectively. They hope great-granddaughter Haylee, 5, will follow suit.

"We wanted to be able to give back to the school as thanks for what it has done for us," he added.

The couple also specified how the money is to be used. The first-floor hallway and foyer of the Livingston C. Lord Administration Building -- more popularly known as Old Main -- will be returned to its original glory, thanks primarily to the Cougills' kind gift.

The project will include, in part, restroom renovations, lead abatement, removal of multiple layers of paint, new ceiling beams and the restoration of all wood wainscot and doors. Light fixtures will be replaced with models more reflective of the early 1900s, giving the hallways a both brighter and airier appearance and feel, and efforts will be made to determine the original paint color for the decorative plaster areas near the main north entrance.

"I felt that was where my heart was," Mr. Cougill continued, recalling his connections with the century-old building. "And after having seen its current condition, I wanted to do something to help. It really needs it."

Both of the Cougills attended classes on the building's third floor. Mr. Cougill recalled having doubts as to whether he would ever graduate from high school, much less go on to college.

"I was 13 when my father passed away," he said. "I quit high school (in Greenup, Ill.) when I was a sophomore in order to go to work at the Ettelbrick Shoe Factory. I wanted to help Mom make the payments on the farm. Times were tough."

A few years later, the family moved to Charleston, where Mr. Cougill was able to pass his high school diploma equivalency exam. He then began attending what was then known as Eastern Illinois State College to earn his teaching degree in business. He was a little older than the traditional student -- 21 or 22, he recalled.

His course of study allowed him to meet his bride-to-be, Mary, and the two wed in 1950, while he was still a student.

"And two weeks later, we bought the store," Mrs. Cougill said. "I worked at Cougill Market while he finished school."

Mr. Cougill expressed his regrets at having had to sell the couple's car in order to make the store's payments. "Once again, times were pretty tough," he recalled, noting that his wife had to get around town in the store's delivery panel truck.

"But I didn't mind," she quickly added.

The couple owned and operated Cougill Market, located near the northwest corner of Charleston's Morton Park, for nine years.

"When we started, I didn't even know what a pork steak was," Mr. Cougill said. "But I had good help. And if your help knows, that's the main thing."

By 1960, the Cougills were ready for a new challenge. Having been able to purchase some land near the west side of town, they were ready to make use of it. And common sense told them that the best use would be that which filled a need in the community.



Max and Mary Cougill have donated a half-million dollars to EIU to fund renovations of Old Main's first floor. The Cougills are pictured outside of Old Main with President Lou Hencken (left) and Vice President for External Affairs Jill Nilsen (right).

Bel-Aire Lanes, a 20-lane bowling alley, soon became popular for its league bowling, cherry Cokes and the first automatic pin-spotters in Charleston. The Cougills owned and operated the establishment for 25 years, and it remains open today under the name Charleston Lanes.

An even larger building sprung up when, in 1979, the couple built Cougill Apartments, the first subsidized housing unit for seniors in the area. Additional land in the immediate area was developed for residential use. The Cougills were also instrumental in the construction of the Charleston school district's administration building, located immediately north of the bowling alley on Polk Street.

Mr. Cougill performed his civic duty, as well, serving as president of Charleston's Chamber of Commerce in 1967 and as the city's mayor from 1969 to 1973. Also a recipient of the chamber's Outstanding Citizen Award (1987), he talks humbly, but confidently, about the couple's successes.

"I've always been a firm believer in an individual's responsibility to himself," he said. "Graduating gives you the tools to work with, but it's up to you what to do with those tools."

Again demonstrating that Eastern is never far from his mind, Mr. Cougill cited EIU President Lou Hencken as an example.

"I admire Lou," he said. "He started at the bottom there at Eastern and worked his way up."

Hencken, who also attended Eastern as a student, expressed his great appreciation for the Cougills' gift. "I think it's wonderful to see alumni who care so much for their alma mater that they're willing to help out financially when they see a need. When the Cougills visited Old Main, they saw chipped and peeling paint, faded wood and dark, dingy lighting – projects repeatedly put on hold as state funding has become more and more scarce.

"As was true more than 100 years ago when the university first opened its doors, Old Main remains the first impression of the campus for many of our visitors. Prospective students, parents, alumni, legislators, donors and potential employees walk through the hallways of this historic structure to find the right office, the old memory or an educational future.

"The Cougills' gift will help ensure that future visits, whatever the reason, will be memorable ones."